

## **"Housing Matters" Student Activation Project**

Date: 12.28.12

Client: San Diego County Behavioral Health Services

Title/Draft: Student Activation Project- Service Learning Class Proposal Summary

### **INTRODUCTION**

Under contract with County Behavior Health Services, Cook + Schmid implemented the Student Activation Project – a participatory and interactive project that aims to educate college students on mental illness and its link to homelessness and supportive housing through activities designed to raise awareness. The program launched in the Fall Semester at San Diego State University with several different outreach tactics including an Ambassador Program, service-learning class project, presentations by Transition Age Youth, etc.

The below service-learning proposals summary highlights student research, outreach tactics and recommendations provided by students in SDSU's Principles of Public Relations course, under the School of Journalism and Media Studies. Students in JMS480 created strategic outreach plans with the goal of attracting attention to supportive housing, homelessness and mental illness specifically among the SDSU college community. Roughly 50 students in the class broke into six groups. They first evaluated the campaign, conducted research via student focus groups, created public relations and outreach plans, and provided clear recommendations for how the Housing Matters campaign can reach our student audience, and how to have a long-lasting affect on campus.

### **RESEARCH**

All six class groups facilitated focus groups with SDSU students. Questions for each focus group were not all the same, and not all participating students had the same major. On request, all verbatim responses can be provided.

#### **GROUP 1**

- Students in this focus group said they would be more open to living near supportive housing when they are young and don't have as many responsibilities, such as a job or family
- Students notice homeless individuals around SDSU by trolley station and dumpsters
- One student said mental illness plays a role in homelessness, others cited the economy or health bills, drugs and alcohol as reasons
- When asked if homelessness is important to them, they said yes, in that they are bothered by homeless individuals "harassing" them
- Many in this focus group didn't think mental illness could be treated, but managed
- Some participants understood that mental illness can be managed and with proper help and support they can live productive lives. Further, they understood that not having this support can lead to homelessness
- Some thought veterans were too proud to ask for or accept help
- When asked if they would be okay with supportive housing units near their home, majority said yes, but cited many of the common negative stereotypes as being

concerns (individuals being disruptive, lowering property values, attracting other homeless individuals to the area, etc.)

- Focus group had mixed opinions about whether or not to inform the community where supportive housing units are being built. Some thought telling people would contribute to the stereotypes

#### GROUP 2

- Several in focus group thought that mental illness played a part in homelessness
- Many thought there were mostly younger homeless males, in their 30's
- Many said they see a lot of homeless veterans
- Some focus group participants thought that being homeless causes mental illness
- Majority of participants said they are most likely to attend a sporting event or events relating to their major as opposed to other campus events (useful for campaign event, presentations, etc.)

#### GROUP 3

- Many focus group participants didn't think the issue of homelessness affected college students as much because they don't see many homeless near campus
- Majority felt there are very few efforts happening on campus to promote awareness of issues surrounding homelessness

#### GROUP 4

- Many students indicated they'd need some sort of incentive in order to get involved with the SAP (extra credit, class credits and prizes, etc.)
- The majority of students weren't aware that mental illness is a major contributing factor to homelessness. Many felt homeless individuals had contributed to their current state by making "bad decisions"
- Students didn't feel a responsibility to help homeless individuals
- Students were unaware of supportive housing or other programs available for homeless with mental illness
- Some students, females in particular, were fearful of having supportive housing units in their neighborhood. They relayed concerns of their safety being compromised
- Some students believed that homelessness causes mental illness. They reasoned that too much time alone could result in individuals developing mental health issues
- Some participants indicated that presentations in classes would be an effective way to spread the campaign messages as students are required to attend courses in order to graduate. Additionally, some stated they'd be willing to write a report on the presentations for extra credit
- A few participants mentioned the value of reaching out to sororities and fraternities on campus to tap into their philanthropic activities
- Focus group participants relayed that out-of-state students may not pay attention to the campaign as they might think supportive housing is confined to San Diego. (May be important to expand the message points to communicate the issue reaches beyond San Diego and similar programs are available across the country)

#### GROUP 5 (all students from College of Health & Human Services)

- None of the students had previously heard of supportive housing
- One student had previously been homeless when he was young
- Students felt empathy for homeless—mentioned many are veterans, people who lost their jobs, families, people with psychiatric issues, etc.

- One student was born in Europe, where his perception is that nobody lives on the street. Participant doesn't understand why it's such a big problem here
- One student identified African Americans and Latinos as highest homeless population due to lack of education
- One student thinks that part of the problem is that people are unaware of the programs and services available
- The group had only guesses on the percentage of homeless people who were mentally ill. Answers ranged from 2%- 45%
- Half of the participants wouldn't mind supportive housing in their area, half would, especially when they have families
- All students agreed that the value of the houses in the area where supportive housing goes in will depreciate and won't be viewed as a nice area
- All students would like to help homeless individuals be aware of the programs and resources that exist

#### GROUP 6

- Focus group participants have very little interaction with homeless community in San Diego
- Several students mentioned offering food, never money
- Some participants mentioned areas with high homeless population are unsafe
- All students agreed that some homeless individuals are more deserving of help than others—identified children and families
- If family member or close friend were homeless, they would help. The family member/friend must be committed to making a change
- Everyone in the focus group knows someone who suffers from mental illness
- About half of the participants saw the correlation between homelessness and mental illness
- All students identified homelessness as a problem in San Diego
- When asked how the community can support homeless individuals, students mentioned food drives and volunteering
- When asked how we can prevent homelessness from happening, one respondent mentioned 'it's part of the balance of our economy'
- If we provide shelter/housing, we should also encourage them to do chores at the shelter, take classes, get a job, etc.
- Majority of participants agreed that neighbors should be told about supportive housing in their neighborhoods before it happens

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the focus group research, students in the JMS480 class provided well-planned strategic outreach plans to assist us in better reaching our student audience via the Student Activation Project. Below, are their recommendations:

- Hire a student intern to implement on-campus Ambassador Program and Housing Matters campaign tactics
- Implement a freshman dorm toiletry drive competition. The dorm that collects the most items will win a party
- Promotions on campus via resource tables, posters, collateral materials, t-shirts, wristbands, etc.

- Promotions on campus via paid advertising in the Daily Aztec and on vending machines at the SDSU trolley station
- Paid advertising on Facebook
- Donation drives—food, toiletries, etc.
  - Raffle tickets given for each item donated. High-ticket raffle items may include iPads, SDSU sporting event tickets, concert tickets, etc. Raffle will be drawn during half-time at a major SDSU men's basketball game
- Partnership between Housing Matters and SDSU Associated Students. Associated Students will act as campaign spokespeople on campus
- Distribute PSA's and videos via social media channels
- Presentations to college classes, specifically public health and health-related classes, and at Greek organizations (students compiled list of SDSU professors interested in classroom presentations)
- Visual setup/event on campus: Supportive housing walkway—progressive series of setups all leading to a canopy that would be staffed with volunteers/ambassadors well-versed on supportive housing. Bracelets and informational materials will be passed out. Incorporate campaign message points on cardboard signs
- Facebook photo contest
- Each participating college/university should have specific branding for the campaign: "SDSU Thinks Housing Matters"
- Targeted outreach to Health and Human Services College at SDSU
- More robust and structured plan for ambassadors. On-campus ambassador leader needed (this person may act as student Ambassador Program intern)
- Strong outreach to Greek community on campus (45 total Greek organizations at SDSU)
- Resource table on campus (Love Library Drive), twice per month. Table will have collateral materials, t-shirts, wristbands, etc. and will be manned with student ambassadors (approval needed from Student Life & Leadership Office)
- Target students who live off-campus in areas where there's higher homeless populations
- Reach out to students via Facebook, email and classes to get them involved in campaign

## EVALUATION

All six student groups recommended surveys at the start and end of the campaign to gauge overall awareness, education and acceptance of supportive housing, homelessness and mental illness among SDSU students.

## NEXT STEPS

Cook + Schmid will continue to work closely with local students to provide information and outreach tools to educate them about supportive housing, and its link to homelessness and mental illness. The recommendations and insights provided by students at SDSU are of high value, and will help shape campaign components in years to come. The ultimate goal of the Student Activation Project is to engage students both in-person and in an online setting through the "Housing Matters" website and social media pages.